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ABSTRACT

In an examination of elementary school children's notions of reading, 1,122 first through sixth graders were individually interviewed. Each child was asked to define reading, and their responses were placed into four categories: those which were vague or irrelevant, those which focused on classroom procedure or the educational value of reading, those which focused on decoding or word recognition, and those which focused on meaning or understanding. Responses which fell into the first category were ignored and only the responses which fell into one of the remaining categories were analyzed. Of this group, the majority of students gave responses which fell into the second or third categories, implying that to them reading was a classroom procedure or a decoding process. Very few responses fell into the fourth category, indicating that most students were not able to associate meaning with reading. The results suggest that teachers should not assume that instruction in reading is necessarily instruction in comprehension. Direct comprehension instruction is needed to make reading sensible for children, and teachers must provide it. (FL)

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Is Reading Sensible for Children?

If we are going to make reading sensible for children, perhaps one of the first steps is to explore, in a systematic fashion, their notions of reading. A teacher might then be in a position to develop and/or alter instruction so that it makes sense to children who are learning to reconstruct meaning from print.

Taylor (1977) and others (Goodman, 1971; Smith, 1978) contend that meaning is what is basic in reading instruction. In other words, the communication of thought between the author and the reader is what's important. Skills instruction may help children make sense from printed materials; however, reading is greater than the sum of its so-called skills (Vacca and Johns, 1976).

Sample and Method

To explore how children in the elementary school viewed reading, a non-random sample of 1,122 students in grades one through six was selected from many different schools in the suburbs of Chicago. The students were assumed to represent the generally expected ranges of intelligence and reading achievement. In terms of socioeconomic status, the teachers indicated that their students ranged from upper-middle class to lower class. The vast majority of the 592 boys and 530 girls were white; however, there were a number of Latino students. The number of students was 82 for first grade, 245 for second grade, 208 for third grade, 245 for fourth grade, 118 for fifth grade, and 124 for sixth grade.

Children in the study were interviewed individually. After some casual conversation to help the child feel at ease, the following question was asked:

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"What is reading?" Each child's response to the question was recorded on audio tape so it could be analyzed and categorized. The interviews were conducted by graduate and undergraduate students in professional reading courses. Prior to actual data collection, the students conducting the interviews were trained using actual responses to previous interviews with children. The criteria for assigning responses from the interviews into four categories was adapted from Weintraub and Denny (1966).

Categories for Responses

The first category contained responses which were circular, vague, or irrelevant. Typical responses included: "When you learn how to do stuff," "I really wouldn't know," and "Reading is reading."

The second category contained responses that focused on classroom procedures or the educational value of reading. Several typical responses included: "It's when you do workbook pages," "Reading books in a circle with the teacher," "To learn stuff so you can get into third grade," and "You read out of a book and then you do exercises and you have a work book and you get grades on it."

The third category included responses which focused on decoding or word recognition. Typical examples included: "A bunch of words," "It's when there are hard words and you have to learn to pronounce them," and "Words, sounds, and letters." One student in the upper grades apparently intertwined some social studies. He said that reading was "when you learn the vowels and continents {sic}."

The fourth category included responses that focused on meaning or understanding. Responses from students included: "I read to get the meaning," "I read a group of words and then I think what they mean and then I go on more,"

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and "I think reading is words that are put into sentences and then sentences are put into paragraphs, and the paragraphs turn into stories which give you meaning."

Results and Discussion

As the interviews were being analyzed, it became apparent that many students gave responses that were of the vague, irrelevant, or "I don't know" variety. Figure 1 contains the percent of students who gave such responses. Several observations seem appropriate.

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Of those students who gave meaningful responses to the question, "What is reading?" the majority of the responses were categorized as classroom procedures or the educational value of reading (category 2). At every grade level over 50 percent of the responses were of this type. Students seem to be preoccupied with workbook pages, reading groups, and following the teacher's directions. A rather unusual response came from a second grade boy who said that reading was "stand up, sit down." When the youngster was asked to explain what he meant, he said that the teacher had him stand up when he read. He would continue reading until he made a mistake. He was then asked to sit down. Hence, reading was perceived as a stand-up, sit-down process.

Responses focusing on word recognition or decoding (category 3) also occurred quite frequently. There was a downward trend in this type of response from first grade through fifth grade. At sixth grade, however, the percent of responses categorized as decoding equalled those given by fourth graders. One student in four is likely to perceive reading as a decoding process. The conern for sounding out strategies is clearly in evidence.

Perhaps most disturbing is the finding that so few students gave responses that focused on meaning or understanding (category 4). Less than one student in five associated meaning with reading. In the first and second grades only 8 percent of the students gave responses that focused on meaning. If a search for meaning does not play a major role in students' reading, perhaps they are content to merely say the words and believe that they are reading. Students need to understand that the center and core of reading is, at the very least, reconstructing the author's message. Words are important but only as a means for making sense from the printed page.

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Recommendations and First Steps

If students' responses in the present investigation are representative of those that would be obtained from classrooms throughout the country, it seems reasonable to suggest that teachers should help their students realize that reading is concerned with meaning.

The use of a fictional example follows. It is designed to help students realize that: (1) reading is a form of communication; (2) reading can be talk written down; and (3) reading is giving meaning to print. The teacher is talking with a student. The dialogue might go as follows.

Teacher: "If you wanted to tell Joe a secret, how would you do it?"

Student: "I would just tell him."

Teacher: "You mean you would talk to him or whisper to him?"

Student: "Yes, that's what I'd do."

Teacher: "What would you do if Joe wasn't here but you still wanted him to know and you knew that he would be back in a little while?"

Student: "I might write him a note."

Teacher: "OK, and when Joe gets here and gets that note what should he do?"

Student: "He should read what I wrote down."

Teacher: "Good. Have you communicated with Joe?"

Student: "Yes."

Teacher: "What did Joe look at?"

In our example, Joe has received a note that a student has written. But, what did that student write down? He/she wrote down what he/she would have said to Joe if he was here. In other words, the talk has been written down. Each printed word will represent only one spoken word and we can now say that a word is a verbal symbol. The example following will demonstrate this concept.

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Teacher: "Suppose that what you were going to tell Joe was that you had a new hot wheels car. Now since you had to write it down it probably looked like this: I HAVE A NEW HOT WHEELS CAR. Joe took this note and began to say what you had written. He said to himself: I-HAVE-A-NEW-HOT-WHEELS-CAR. If he were to say that out loud would it sound like what you were going to say?

Student: "Yes, that's what I would have said."

Teacher: "Now Joe still has not read what you have written down. He has said the words out loud but he has not read them! In order to be really reading Joe must know what it is that you have said. He must get some meaning from those symbols called words. If he comes up to you later and asks to see your hat then he has not read anything. You told him about some new car and not some hat so he did not read that note. He had not gotten meaning so therefore, no reading has taken place. Reading involves meaning and if you do not know what something means, you have not read it!" "Now what are some of the things in daily life that you read: some things that you get meaning from?"

Student: "We read road signs on the highway like SLOW DOWN or CURVES AHEAD. We also read warnings on medicine bottles. We also read the newspaper and know what it said about sports or movies."

Hopefully the student will begin to see that reading involves meaning. Teachers should not assume that teaching reading provides a basis for students to learn that it involves comprehension. Direct instruction is needed and teachers must provide it. Word-centered instruction can lose sight of comprehension. Words in isolation can lead to word calling instead of reading.

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The data from the present study has demonstrated that students in grades one through six have very little understanding of what reading entails. To help make reading sensible for students, the focus of instruction must be on meaning. Words like kingcup, yegg, and kinkajou can be read or merely called. By the way, can you read those three words? Be careful. Your response may reveal considerable insight about your notion of reading! Be sensible -- focus on meaning.

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Figure 1. Percent of Students From the Total Sample (N=1,122) Who Gave Vague, Irrelevant, or "I don't know" Responses to the Question, "What is Reading?"

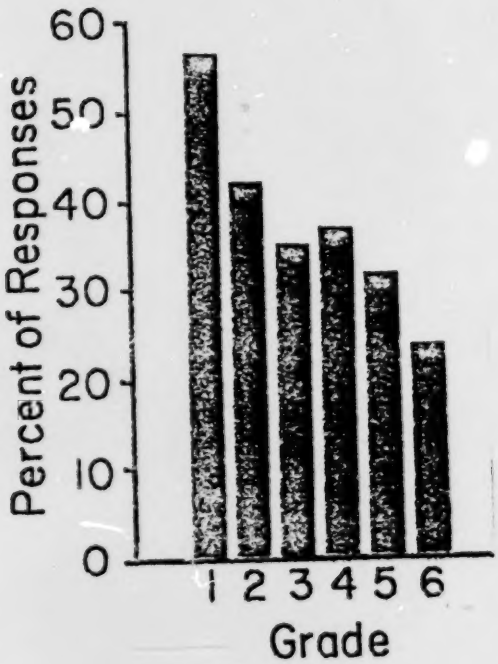

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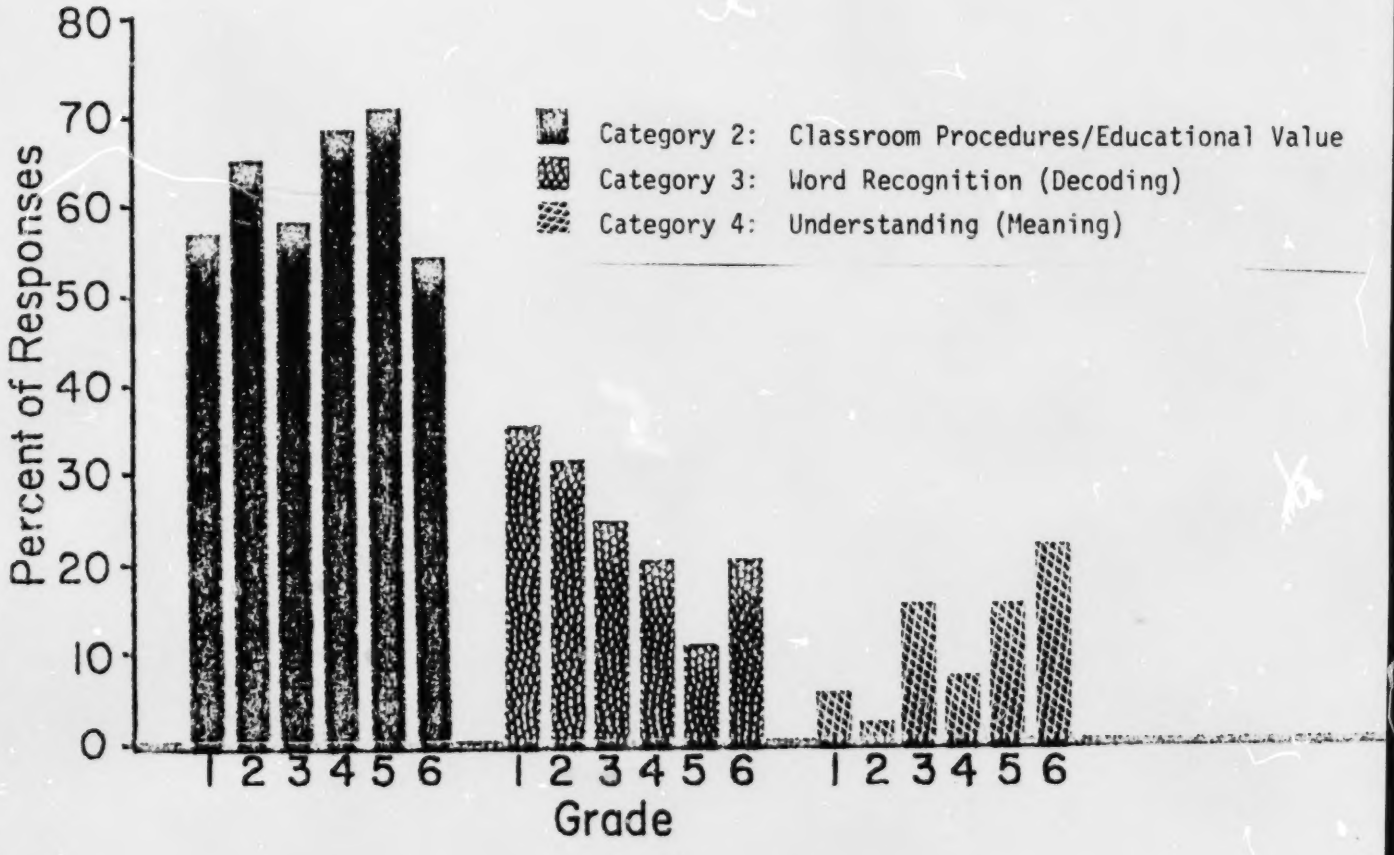
Figure 2. Categories of Meaningful Responses to the Question, "What is Reading?"



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